

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

from the Pacific Garden Mission, Chicago, Illinois

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Chapter Twenty

George Mohr Risks the Yards

GEORGE MOHR, hobo, lay face down on his coat in the railroad yard. It had rained that afternoon, but George had found a partly dry spot between two small rivers that had been dirt and cinders before the rain.

"Hey, Buddy." He had heard the man sloshing up behind him but had decided he wouldn't give him any signal that he wanted to be friendly. After he heard the greeting, George waited about a minute before he rolled over, and said, "Huh?" The man standing in front of him was wearing a gray pinstriped jacket and a pair of pants that had once belonged to a Tuxedo. He was carrying a bottle. Two more bulged out of his pants' pockets. All three were full.

"Whatsa matter, Chum? You don't sound very talkative," the newcomer asked.

"I don't know," said George. "Blue?"

"Guess so."

"Most likely the rain. Listen, I had a streak of luck this afternoon and I been looking for a guy to share it. I'm riding the cushions to Pittsburgh tonight and I got me three pints. Now, I can't take them all with me, so I'll give you one for the road. I'll take one with me, and we'll split the other right now. Come on, this'll fix up your blues."

George pulled his coat from underneath him with one hand and reached for the bottle with the other. "Thanks, Chum," he said.

When George and his new friend had finished the bottle between them, the switching engine smoke that trailed along the yards like low skywriting looked not as gray as it had; it looked pink

instead. By ten o'clock, George was about ready to tell the stranger some of his troubles when the man got to his feet, tried to shake a crease back into his Tuxedo pants. "Ten o'clock's my time of departure," he said. "Been good seeing you, Chum."

George watched him heading across the yard. He could see a watchman's lantern splash light on the man's back rhythmically. Or was it two lanterns, or maybe three?

"Mighty strong stuff in that bottle," George thought as he swung his legs across a rail on the railroad siding and fell soundly asleep.

He thought he was on a freight car riding through the Kentucky mountains, the roadbed was bad, he was shaking and shaking and shaking. He woke up and he was still shaking. A policeman had him by both shoulders. "For the love of Pete, man, look!" the policeman shouted.

"Huh?" George wanted to go back to his ride through Kentucky. "What is it?"

"Nothing at all!" the policeman answered. "See that empty coach standing there beside you? It came rolling down here toward you in the dead of night and it stopped - not six inches to spare, from your legs."

There was something not six inches from him, but it was too fuzzy to be a coach. George ran his hand along the cinders until he touched the cold steel of the car wheel. He was suddenly very sick to his stomach with fear, but the policeman prodded him again.

He scrambled to his feet.

"And get out of here," the policeman warned. "You're cluttering up the place."

George drifted to the other side of the yards, focused his eyes on another freight and made for it. He was Just about to climb into it when the railroad policeman spotted him and fired twice.

George heard the plop of the bullets against the wood of the car, just over his head. Then he ran as fast as he could totter to the engine tender, climbed in, jackknifed into a heap and passed out. As his body went soft with unconsciousness, an arm and leg drooped over the side of the tender limp as so much spaghetti.

The fireman's voice sounded as if he had spent a lifetime outroaring steam and the flames of his firebox.

"You're a fool," he bellowed. George tried to push away the sound, gave up and opened his eyes. He was still on the coal tender, but the train had stopped. A red-faced man was shouting at him.

"You almost got killed, you fool."

"Huh? Whata' you mean?"

"I just got this rattler stopped in time after I seen you. You had one arm and one leg hanging off the side of the tender and we're heading for a tunnel. You'd been smashed flatter than a pancake."

George didn't sleep much the rest of the night. He was sober now, feeling the jounce and jolt of the train in all his bones. Three close calls in one night, but what difference if they hadn't missed? At least, it would have been a clean ending to a disordered life. He lay there, thinking about the jumble.

He remembered the quivering in his stomach when he was seven, back in the 1880's, and they'd told him his mother was sick. The doctor in Utica had called it "slow consumption." George didn't know much about it, but he did know it was bad. And he was scared.

He had a feeling then if he lost Mama, everything would be upside-down. But if he stayed with her all the time, maybe he wouldn't lose her.

In those days George got halfway to school mornings with his sister when he paled. "You go on," he said. "I'm going back to Mama."

He ran down the lane, peeped in her window; if she were sleeping, he crawled inside and under the bed.

Later, when she woke, she called out, "George, liebschen. You are under the bed again."

George pulled his body out over the floor. "Yes, Mama. I'm here."

"So many times you slip home from school and hide under Mama's bed you should be scolded, George," Mama reasoned. "Your papa will scold."

"I'll get out before he comes home," George promised.

"I just got to be with you. I just got to."

Papa found out. But this scolding couldn't take Mama away from George, any more than the cane licking the minister gave him could. His father, in despair, turned him over to the minister. Nothing could take Mama away from George.

Until the day he ran home from school, slid under her bed and waited. He collected those dust kittens into a mound by sweeping them along the floor with the arm of his jacket and he waited - and waited.

But Mama never called out to him that day. She was dead.

After his mother died, he'd hired out on a farm at the age of thirteen. He hated it and left as soon as he could. He drifted back to Utica and got a job as a bartender on Genesee Street.

On Genesee Street, he found the way to forget his troubles. He got acquainted with the laughing, the forgetting, and the clouds that come from a bottle. After a while, it was mostly clouds that were coming his way. Clouds and "hang-overs." George was a miserable seventeen-year-old.

So he left Utica, tried a job punching cattle on a Texas ranch. Next there was a spell in Chicago,

tending bar again.

He lasted there five years. Then he got an urge to see Utica once more.

The tender jostled George on through the darkness. He might have made good his trip back to Utica, if it hadn't been for liquor. Because he met Sally there, in hop-picking season at a country dance. With her long blond hair, she was the prettiest girl there.

He tried to remember whether he got high that very first night they met. No matter - it wasn't long before Sally found out he was nothing more than a drunk.

She married him, anyway, because she truly loved him.

She stayed by him, too. From town to town, job to job, for twenty years, through more drunks than he could count. Even with the five children, she stayed by him, babied him, loved him. Sally was a good woman.

He couldn't forget the day the d.t.'s got hold of him.

Snakes and rats and spiders and elephants crawling on the walls, beckoning to him. He was in the cellar, but the snakes were wrapped around the furnace pipes. "Doesn't somebody, somewhere care about me?" he shrieked.

Sally came down the cellar stairs. "George, don't say that. I care about you. I love you with all my heart."

He shoved her away. "I'm leaving, Sally. I'll be back. But I got to go away - far away. I can't face the children or you or anybody else any more. I'll be back when I've pulled myself together some."

After that, he "hoboed" across the country. From state to state, from coast to coast, keeping drunk most of the time. He slept in jails and in Skid Row "jungles." He lied, he pawned his clothes, he stole to get his liquor.

"For eight years, you been a bum, George Mohr," he told himself lying in the coal tender as it chugged into Muskegon, Michigan. "Nobody would have cared if you'd been smashed in that tunnel."

But he hadn't been smashed. And he hadn't forgotten that the next morning in Muskegon. He heard some talk on a street corner about the government camps hiring men for labor.

"Maybe I'll stay stationary for a while," he decided, "and get me some honest dough."

An address after his name, that ache in his muscles that came from swinging a shovel and not from sleeping in a "hobo jungle" - all added up to a new feeling about himself. He spaced his drunks farther apart, and he thought more and more about his home. Finally, he wrote to his daughter, Ruth. "I think I'm getting a grip on myself," he wrote. "Tell your mother."

For the next week, he didn't drink at all. At mail time, he hung around his box, waiting for a letter. But then he caught a whiff of somebody's whisky on a down breeze and he hiked along the road into town one night.

He was seeing double when he shuffled into camp early the next morning, but he knew there was just one letter in his mailbox. It was from his daughter, Ruth. He kept seeing double when he tried to read it, but then, like a quart of black coffee, a cold shower, the words in the letter sobered him up.

"I have to let you know that Mother died yesterday morning. She was drawing water at the kitchen sink for a pot of tea, when she got dizzy and died in my arms less than twenty minutes later," Ruth wrote.

George put the letter in his pocket, walked out beyond the camp and lay down at the edge of a lake. He stretched out his arms, tore at the grass and sobbed. Go to his wife's funeral? He couldn't. He was too ashamed. He should have been smashed in the tunnel.

The next day, he left the government camp. He got a job in a factory in another Michigan town. He cut down on his liquor and saved his money. "Going to Chicago," he told the fellows he worked with. But he didn't tell them why.

When George got off the train in Chicago in 1940, he was sober enough to hail a redcap. "Hey, Bud, know where the Pacific Garden Mission is?" he said.

"Yes, sir," the redcap said. "Straight ahead that way to State Street, then turn north. You can't miss it."

George nodded. "Thank you," he said. "I should know. I've been here once before. There's a man there that can help me, if anybody in the world can help me. He's got the best face I ever seen," He fell over a suitcase. The redcap looked bored, picked up the suitcase and moved away.

Straight ahead that way to State Street, then turn north.

Or had the man said go straight north till you come to State Street? For half a day George roamed Skid Row, up and down State, Van Buren, Clark, Madison. He had missed it, though.

He fell over a drunk sticking his feet across the sidewalk, and went on. He peered in windows and at electric signs, sorting them out for one that said, "Pacific Garden Mission."

And he looked for the man with "the best face" he'd ever seen. He saw scared faces, rouged faces, sooty faces, evil faces, and then he saw - the good face he'd been searching for - and the sign that said "Pacific Garden Mission,"

The door opened and there was the man with the smiling face inside the doorway of the mission. "Come on in, my friend. Come in," he called out.

"I came a long way to find you," George said. He took off his hat, tried to smooth down the rim

that rumed and bunched below the greasy black ribbon.

"Is that so? I'm Harry Saulnier," the superintendent said.

The prayer room was quiet and dark. "I know you're drunk now, George," the superintendent told him. "But GOD can get to you, even through your sins. When you say the word He can get through. All things shall be made new,"

"So I won't want to drink again?" George asked.

"So you won't need to drink again, George. **'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life!'**" (John 4:14).

"Then that's what I want," George Mohr said. "I want that well of everlasting water."

And that's exactly what he got. "No more drifting or hunting any more. For years I've been filled and satisfied and happy," said George Mohr. "GOD is all for us - providin' we're all for Him!"

~ end of book ~